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Impressions of Ebru and Turkishness in the 21st Century

Lisa DiCarlo

On June 18th, 2007, *Ebru: Reflections of Cultural Diversity in Turkey* began its ten-city tour of Turkey with a debut exhibit in Istanbul, and ended on March 31st, 2009 with the closing of the exhibit in Ankara. The mixed media project, a combination of text, music, visual images, essays and panel discussions, is dominated by Attila Durak's large-format documentary ethnographic photographs of 44 ethnic groups he encountered during seven consecutive summers of fieldwork throughout Turkey. Durak, who is from Turkey and studied photography in the US, began this project with the initial intention of learning about the cultural diversity of his own country and ultimately, wanting to share what he learned with those same people in the form of a book and an exhibition that would open in New York and Istanbul (Durak 2006). The project's reach has grown considerably since those early days of planning more than seven years ago. This paper explores exhibit goers' responses during *Ebru's* ten-city tour of Turkey.¹ After a thorough description of the project, I attempt to situate the Turkish public's responses to *Ebru* by exploring the nature of visual representation as well as evolving attitudes toward cultural diversity in Turkey.

Introduction:

Ebru as a Metaphor for Cultural Diversity

The metaphors and proverbs commonly used to describe the nature of cultural diversity in Turkey are manifold. A popular saying states that there are 72½ *millet*, or peoples, in Turkey. Others speak of Turkey's cultural mosaic, its melting pot of cultures, or its patchwork quilt of diversity (Belge 2006). None of these

seemed to capture the dynamic type of cultural sharing, blending and touching that Durak witnessed in Turkey. The term 'ebru' provided a better metaphor to describe the relationship between and within the cultures of Anatolia. Ayşe Gül Altınay describes ebru as an art form through which the artist "... creates his or her drawing on water and then transfers this "floating" artwork onto paper... ebru connotes fluidity, movement, connectedness, permeability and contingency" (2006:19). The colors of an ebru, similar to the cultures of Anatolia, are visible in all of their various shades of contact.



Figure 1. "Happy is he who says 'I am a Turk.'"—Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Examining the Scope of *Ebru*: Portrait or Snapshot?

Just as ethnographies provide incomplete representations of cultures (Clifford 1987), photographs also lack the ability to represent what lies, or doesn't lie, beyond the frame (Worth 1981). Taken as a whole mixed media project, *Ebru* provides a view of contemporary Turkish society that is more aptly described as an extended gaze than a glimpse. Durak's aim was not to create a visual catalogue of the entirety of cultural diversity in Turkey. Acknowledging not only the limitations of the individual image, but also budgetary constraints and incomplete knowledge, he says *Ebru's* photographs are representative of what (and who) he was able to find on his particular journey. He also points out that while the book contains 320 images, he chose them from a body of more than 20,000 photographs. The project, then, presents a view of Turkey, the artist's view, thrice-filtered by the process of selection during fieldwork, during the creation of the book, and finally the creation of each exhibit (as discussed by Lutz and Collins 1991; see also Ruby 1991; De Lorenzo 2005; Berger 1977). This process of selection continues, depending on the physical capacity of each venue.

The photographs are organized in the exhibit halls with the intention of emphasizing common aspects of everyday life in Turkey. One section focuses on prayer, one on grieving; one on weddings, one on food; one on working, and one on playing.² While the cultural variations are clear, so is the project's message: we are different, but we are also the same.

Each photograph has a title that includes the ethnic identity of the subjects, the location, and the month and year the photograph was taken. Durak asked his subjects how they would like to be identified in his book, and wrote down what they said. It was not clear to the exhibit goers that the ethnic labels in the titles—Kurd from Varto, Nusayri from Antakya—were chosen by the subjects and not by the photographer. As such, they were the subject of much heated discussion. I will address this topic later in the paper.

In addition to the photographs, the project includes a musical component. *Ebru* the CD is a compilation of well-known Anatolian folk songs performed in eleven of Turkey's 36 indigenous languages and identified by name and cultural group of origin. The CD is sold with *Ebru* the book, and the songs are played in the exhibit halls when possible.³ The book itself is 450 pages and weighs 5 kilograms. It includes 24 essays that explore different aspects of cultural diversity in Turkey. With the exception of the first piece by John Berger, all of the essays were written by contemporary Turkish scholars, writers and artists. Some of the essays have been printed onto banners that are displayed in the exhibit halls so that people who have not read the book have a chance to reflect

on some of the ideas explored therein. At every venue, the artist's statement, acknowledgments, and a listing of the sponsors are posted in the exhibit hall.

If the music and photos work together to create a celebratory atmosphere in the exhibit halls, the same cannot be said of the panel discussions that take place during each stop of *Ebru's* tour. The panels consist of a core team of Attila Durak, the photographer, and Anthropologist Ayşe Gül Altınay, the book's editor and contributing essayist, along with a rotating group of essayists from the book. The panelist/writers discuss what *Ebru* has meant to them, as well as their individual experiences with cultural diversity in Turkey. As the tour progressed, the unofficial "role" of some panelists began to surface. These roles seemed to develop in relation to the comments of audience members and other panelists. Altınay, as moderator and panelist/writer, frequently found herself restoring the order after heated discussions and bringing each panel to a compassionate, mindful and respectful conclusion. Durak became known among panelists as somewhat of an agitator, asking the audience probing and raw questions about their prejudices and fears. It is worth noting that Durak does not know his own ethnic background, and states that as a young child, he learned of the Ottoman Empire's history of cultural diversity—but somehow that topic was never covered in textbooks on modern Turkey. Turkish writer and lawyer Fethiye Çetin often opened with a discussion of growing up Turkish and later discovering that her grandmother was Armenian. During the panels, she could often be heard telling audiences that when we start asking questions about each other's past histories, we will stop hating each other. As legal counsel for the family of assassinated ethnic Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, her message carries a certain degree of gravitas. Writer Takuhi Tovmasyan spent the tour gently describing how she was kicked out of conservatory as a small child when the judges at her audition learned that she was Armenian. Audience members responded in different ways: one young ethnic Turk from Samsun apologized on behalf of her country; an ethnic Turkish woman in Kars asked for help in reconciling the competing narratives of brutality with which Armenian and Turkish children are raised; and in Izmir, audience members responded self-consciously with personal accounts of childhood friendships with Armenians, Greeks, and Jews.

It was not enough to show people pictures of Turkey's diversity. After all, people tend to imbue visual images with qualities and messages that comfort rather than disturb (Lacan 1981). The panel discussions provide an opportunity for people to engage more critically with the experiences of cultural others, and to do so in a public forum. The conversations had a tendency to disturb and provoke as often as they promoted healing dialogues. In the next section, I will explore why cultural diversity persists as a sensitive topic in the public discourse of contemporary Turkey.

From Empire to Nation: "Redefining Collectivity as Community"⁴

In an article that explores different types of "gaze" present in creating, viewing, reading and analyzing photography, Lutz and Collins state that the reader's gaze "has a history and a future" (1991:138). The history informing the Turkish public's viewing of *Ebru* deserves some attention. In particular, 85 years of attempted modernizing, secularizing, and homogenizing the nation has given the Turkish population a particular lens through which to confront the reality of Turkey's modern-day diverse cultures, lifestyles, and living standards.

Nationalism has been described as having a self-image and a true nature that are inversely related (Gellner 1983:125). Gellner likens the true nature of national populations to a Kokoschka painting, with mixed, uneven and borderless colors, and a shape that is only discernible when taken as a whole. The self-image, in contrast, is more reminiscent of a Modigliani, with obvious order, borders, and isolation of colors. Smith sees as unproblematic the tendency of individuals to identify simultaneously with an ethnicity, a region, a state, and a continent (1991: 175). While this may be possible in theory, I suggest here that in the case of the modern Turkish Republic, it has not always been encouraged, especially with regard to a non-Turkish ethnic identity.

The engineers of the modern Turkish nation-state exacted a toll on the multiethnic, multi-faith, multilingual Anatolian population during the turbulent years of mass exodus, population transfers and the virtual destruction of non-Turkish and non-Muslim ethno-religious communities. Non-Turkish peoples that were not expelled were strongly encouraged to embrace Turkish identity (Çağaptay 2006). Place names and personal names were changed to reflect the Turkishness of the new nation (Mardin 2002; see also Şafak 2006). These events and attitudes contributed to the forging of an ethnic Turkish, Turkish-speaking Sunni Muslim model for the Turkish citizenry. Anyone who did not fall naturally into these categories was encouraged to at least emulate them (Çağaptay 2006). This was facilitated by the creation of a national school curriculum that omitted, still omits, any acknowledgment or discussion of Turkey's culturally diverse past or present.

While the republican campaign for ethno-religious homogeneity was transformative for the new nation-state, secularization was even more fundamental to Atatürk's vision of Turkey. In the new Turkey, allegiance to the state was supposed to supplant faith as the unifying force for the Turkish population. The state assumed control over all religious affairs, including the construction of mosques, the training of imams, and religious instruction in schools in an attempt to keep religion in its proper place. The laws governing the role and appearance of religious practice in daily life were comprehensive and

far-reaching, to the extent of dictating how people dressed: the fez was banned and women were strongly encouraged not to veil.⁵

Fundamental to Atatürk's desire for a secular Turkish nation was his belief that only secular societies could be modern. In essence, the drive for secularization was inextricably bound to Atatürk's modernizing campaign. People were encouraged to listen to Western music, wear Western clothing, even change their dietary habits (see Kasaba 1997), and in one of the most significant and ambitious campaigns of language reform the world has witnessed to date, they were forced to abandon the Arabic script used in Ottoman times and begin writing the Turkish language with the Western alphabet (Lewis 2004). The day of rest was moved from Friday to Sunday in order to be more compatible with the Western world, and high schools and colleges offered not only the study of European languages, but entire European language-medium education, while Turkey's indigenous languages became less and less prominent in the nation's picture of itself, in some cases being ignored or silenced to the point of extinction.⁶ Urban life was idealized as the modern life, and anyone who had the means to move to the city, any city, certainly felt the pull to do so.

Eighty-five years after the birth of the Turkish Republic, Turkish society is still negotiating the secularizing, modernizing, homogenizing campaigns in a number of ways. Kandiyoti writes that even though Turkey was never physically occupied by a colonial power, "European hegemony and the perceived 'backwardness' of [Turkish society] created a terrain for ideological contest in which notions of 'catching up', imitation of the West, cultural corruption and authenticity continued to have a purchase on political discourse" (2002:3; see also Kasaba 1997). To be sure, the perceived backwardness, or more accurately, the *recognition* of perceived backwardness as part of the foreign gaze, was instrumental in propelling Atatürk forward in his march to modernize the country. More than a decade ago, Gülalp described a context-dependent articulation of nationalism that is prevalent in Turkey today. The outward-speaking voice of this nationalism rebels against the colonizing gaze of the West, and the inward manifestation rejects the local diversity of the nation (1997). An exploration of the Turkish public's impressions of *Ebru* reveals that there are multiple narratives of how the republican project has influenced (and influences) Turkey's ability to recognize her own image in a portrait of herself. Or, to pose a question based on Renan's description of nationhood, how does *Ebru* remind people of what they have in common as well as what they were expected to forget (Anderson 1983)?

Situating *Ebru*: The Sociopolitical Climate⁷

Ebru's debut in Turkey could not have come at a better time. In recent years, there has been a literary explosion of texts that acknowledge and even celebrate ethnic diversity. Fethiye Cetin's *My Grandmother* explores the author's discovery of her Armenian heritage. Tovmasyan's *Sofraniz Sen Olsun*, part memoir and part cook book, explores the multicultural culinary traditions of her Armenian grandparents. Ethnic diversity has become a topic of inquiry (as opposed to inquietude) on many talk shows, and TV series such as *Yabancı Damat*, which chronicles the lives of a Turkish-Greek couple and their families, are incredibly popular. Turkey has moved from banning minority languages to establishing a 24-hour Kurdish language TV station.

However, Turkish society has often demonstrated a tendency for a violently swinging pendulum of ethnic tolerance. In this respect, *Ebru* also could not have come at a worse time. In February 2006, Father Andrea Santoro was shot by a young Turkish man in the Black Sea town of Trabzon. There would be more violence against Christians to come. The summer of 2006, a year before *Ebru*'s opening, was author Orhan Pamuk's trial. He was called into court for violating Article 301 of the Turkish Constitution, which makes it a crime to insult Turkishness. Pamuk was accused of insulting Turkishness when he made mention of the Armenian genocide in an interview with a Swiss magazine. Elif Şafak, another writer, and Turkish-born ethnic Armenian journalist Hrant Dink would not be far behind. In truth, Hrant Dink was used to these types of cases and accusations, as the outspoken editor of *Agos*, the only bilingual Turkish-Armenian newspaper in Turkey. Scores of other lesser known writers and journalists were still being brought to trial for insulting Turkishness. Even if they were not charged with the crime of which they were accused, their names would circulate in the public domain, on television shows and in newspapers, essentially creating a national courtroom in which the accused would be tried repeatedly during discussions in tea gardens, at dinner tables, in card halls and the barber shop.

After Orhan Pamuk won the Nobel Prize in Literature in the fall of 2006, the discussions intensified. It was being said that the West had rewarded him for airing Turkey's dirty laundry, and trying to protect him from reprisal (Ekinçi, 2007). Indeed, the news of his award eclipsed reports of his trial. He began to receive death threats. He left the country for a period (*No One Drives Me into Exile*).

During the same season, Pope Benedict made the first papal visit to Turkey since Pope John Paul II's trip to Ankara in 1979. His meeting with the Orthodox Greek Patriarchate sparked much dialogue about the reunion of the Catholic Church, and, in more conspiracy-oriented circles, about the West's interest

in returning Anatolia to its previous Christian-majority state by promoting religious conversion. The streets were blocked as the Pope toured Istanbul, the Blue Mosque was cleared out as was the Hagia Sophia. Many people complained about the inconvenience as they wondered whether Christian minorities would become more powerful again. During this time, churches in various areas of Turkey reported an increase in stones being thrown through their windows as well as pastors receiving threats of violence.

Then in January of 2007, a seventeen year-old ultra-nationalist Turk, again from Trabzon, shot and killed Hrant Dink as he was leaving the *Agos* office. The entire nation was in shock, mostly due to the country's tragic loss of a cherished son, but also due to an embarrassing loss of face in the eyes of the world. 100,000 people marched through the streets of Istanbul to protest his death and attend his burial. Television shows celebrated Hrant Dink's life and his efforts to promote peace and healing by airing stories of his work, his life, and his childhood in Malatya. The entire country was on edge as the contagion of one area's tension infected another. During a soccer match between Malatya and Elazığ shortly after Dink's death, the fans of opposing teams were shouting "Armenian Malatya" and "Kurdish terrorist" as taunts. The mayors of both towns appeared on television and were quoted in newspapers saying that their cities were peaceful, in spite of the unfortunate ethnic slurs that were exchanged during the soccer match.

Then in April of 2007, three missionaries were slain by Islamo-fascist teenagers in Hrant Dink's hometown. It was as if someone needed to step forward to avenge the insult of Armenian-ness that was leveled at the soccer fans months earlier. Again, the country was in shock. As the connection between ultra-nationalism and nationalist Islam came into focus, the secular public was inspired to act. As the government was contemplating early elections, people all over Turkey participated in marches and protests against an Islamist regime. They were marching in defense of secularism. Covered women walking in wealthy Western neighborhoods during this time reported being openly insulted by their unscarved sisters.

At the opening of *Ebru* in Istanbul, which was by invitation only, there was police security as well as a metal detector. Because of the subject matter, people were concerned for the wellbeing of the photographer, his editor, his publisher, and anyone who might be participating in a panel discussion. During this turbulent time, no one felt like taking chances.

The opening passed without incident. There were over 1,000 people attending the debut in the Binbirdirek Cistern in the Sultanahmet district of the city. As time passed, security was relaxed. The metal detector was removed. The exhibit stayed at the cistern for one month before beginning its tour of the rest of Turkey.

Silent Media

It is worth mentioning here that the Turkish media coverage of the exhibit was strangely, uniformly positive (see Aktaş 2007; Sever 2007). The exhibit received quite a bit of radio and television news coverage, but no one was willing to engage critically in front of a large viewership or readership with an exhibit that had cultural diversity as its topic, especially given the political climate and the recent occurrence of hate crimes aimed at religious and ethnic minorities. In every town, there was a short article announcing the exhibit by name and giving the venue information, as well as a brief description of the project. Durak's appearances on Açık Radyo and the state-run TRT evening program in June of 2007 were equally uncritical and unprobing. His appearances on NTV, CNN and Show TV only allowed him to discuss the project in the most superficial way. It was as if the entire media community were holding its breath and waiting for the exhibit to pass. Only foreign newspapers had the freedom to publish articles that explored the exhibit's topic in depth and pondered the implications of its tour of Turkey (Tavernese 2008; Cockburn and DiCarlo 2008).

In total, the exhibit toured ten cities—Istanbul, Kars, Diyarbakir, Antakya, Mersin, Van, Samsun, Bursa, and Izmir, and Ankara. There were plans to travel to other cities such as Eskişehir, Kayseri, and Çanakkale. Some cities were uninterested in hosting an exhibit that promoted a culturally diverse view of Turkey, and other locations didn't work out due to timing. More than 75,000 people across Turkey came to the exhibit. It seemed fitting that the final panel discussion in Ankara would coincide with the increasingly publicized celebration of Nevruz, the Eastern Anatolian commemoration of the New Year, and within weeks of the opening of TRT Ses, the first state-sponsored 24 hour Kurdish language channel on Turkish television.

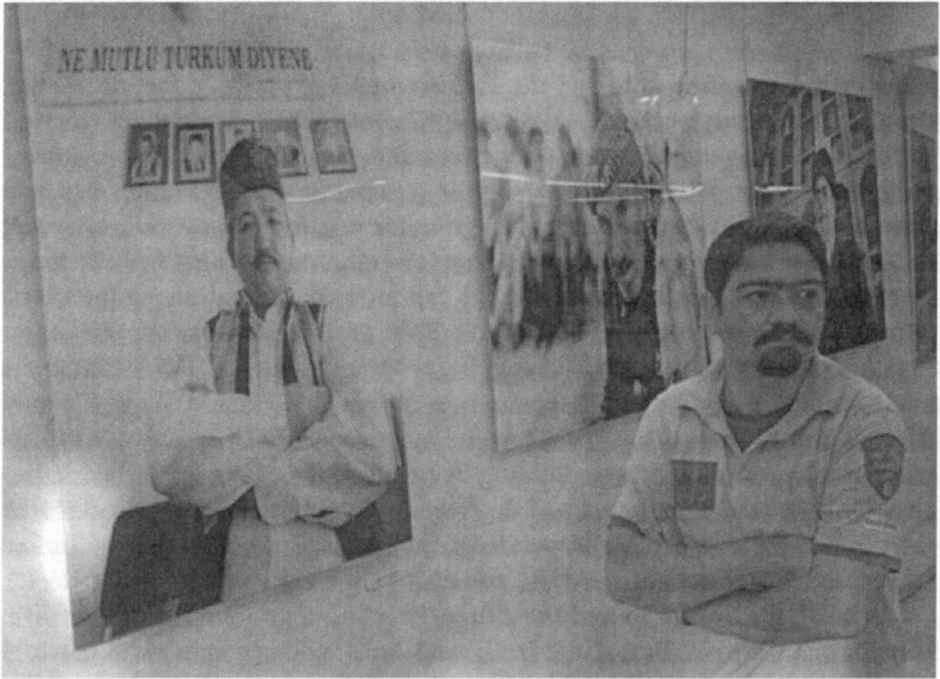


Figure 2. İzmir Exhibition, June 2008

General Patterns in Viewer Responses⁸

While *Ebru* is a mixed media project, the large-format photographs are the focus of the exhibits. It has long been acknowledged that visual images are approached textually (Benjamin 1970; Barthes 1977), and that when approached in this way, the 'reader' is free to receive the message intended by the photographer, or to read into the image a very personal text that the reader brings to the image (Tagg 1988). In the words of John Berger, "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (1977:8). The reading of the images is informed by their engagement with social space and real time (Edwards 2001:3). By extension, a reading of people's impressions of *Ebru* reveals what they believe about contemporary cultural diversity in Turkey.⁹

Kratz describes understanding viewers' interpretations as "an exercise in extrapolation from fragments" (2002:133). Viewers often take their impressions with them without offering to share. Even visitor surveys and focus groups provide little depth or detail, according to Kratz. The reasons for this may vary according to place. In Turkey, there is a popular saying that service providers often use with their customers: "Give your complaints to us, tell your compliments to everyone else." The inherent attitude is one

of not airing negative opinions in public and it operates in many contexts in Turkish society: not speaking negatively about one's family, not speaking negatively about one's culture, and not speaking negatively about one's country. In each context, there is a different definition of "public" (global, national, and familial) but the attitude persists at many levels. Since guest book comments are accessible to all who visit the exhibits, it is possible that the writers consider them to be public statements. Perhaps this explains why the guest book comments tended to be less critical than the feedback people offered in interviews, where they were guaranteed anonymity.

Fragments of Opinion

There were three aspects of diversity that people tended to comment on, and they are directly related to the ascribed categories of cultural homogeneity, secularism and modernism inherent in the articulation of Turkish nationhood. Viewers from every region commented on ethnic diversity, diversity in living standards, and religious practices captured in the images.

Culturally Diverse Turkey

Viewers from many venues saw ethnic diversity as a dangerous quality to emphasize. The strongest opinions surfaced during the exhibits in Van and Samsun, and during the panel discussion in Izmir.

One common reaction concerned the labels. Giving names to ethnic identity was controversial choice and was interpreted by many as an intention to agitate. Baxendall writes that labels express what the artist wishes to convey to the people about his subject (1991). In this case, the artist wished to convey the self-description of the people in the photographs. People questioned the wisdom of this type of provocation, offering mixed opinions from those who thought Turkey needed this kind of provocation and would end up stronger because of it, and those who felt that Turkish unity would not be able to withstand the impact of increased awareness of and attention to ethnic diversity. The majority of the written comments were positive:

"We probably need this message now more than ever. Yes, we are the diverse, multicultural children of this nation. Our cultures and differences shall not be torn apart."—Viewer from Istanbul

"Dear Attila, Health to your hands. I feel like I have traveled through Turkey and come face to face with all of the beautiful

colors of Anatolia. I was very moved. May we continue to live in such a culturally rich country. We have been this way for millennia. Thank you for showing this to us, and to the world.”—viewer from Diyarbakir

“I wish we could all live together in harmony the way these people are positioned side by side, smiling, in this exhibit hall.”—Comment expressed by viewers in Van, Diyarbakir, Kars, and Samsun.

There were, however, a few exceptions:

“I don’t know what your intention was, but I think this exhibit is just wrong. To show this much ethnic diversity at a time like this is not a good idea at all. We’re fighting to stay together and united—why are you exhibiting our differences?”—viewer from Kars

“Instead of emphasizing people’s differences, I wish you would have shown how we are similar and united.”—viewer from Van

“I find it meaningless and unfortunate that you would emphasize our ethnic and religious differences at this critical point in time. I believed I lived in a country where ethnic and religious discrimination didn’t happen. There are also enlightened and educated people living here.”—viewer from Samsun

A similar sentiment came from the Van Justice and Development Party regional representative’s guest book comment:

This high quality and demanding project gives us the possibility to take a nostalgic tour of our Anatolia. My only desire is that in a world that is crying out for unity, harmony and peace, an exhibit that does not emphasize ethnic and religious characteristics would be much more valuable. Congratulations and I wish you much success.

In an exit interview, the same guest expressed his appreciation that the artist had contributed to the modern atmosphere of Van by bringing such an art exhibition and by constructing a permanent gallery space that would

accommodate future artists visiting the city. While an artistic display of Turkey's diversity was considered "modern," the images themselves provided a "nostalgic" tour of the country—even though the photographs are recent. This reflects a deep-seated belief that visible ethnicity is, or should be, a thing of the past.

In Samsun, the small town on the Black Sea where Atatürk landed and started the War of Liberation in 1919, the reactions to diversity were similar. As the young volunteers who helped install the exhibit began removing the plastic film from the large photographs, they became uneasy. Some left. Later, when they were placing the names of the people under the photographs—Armenian from Istanbul, Alevi Kurd from Varto, Greek-speaking Muslim from Ayvalık—still more volunteers dropped out. The pictures of difference, and the fact that they were publicly *named* as different, made these young people afraid. They were afraid of what would happen to them for being associated with such a radical exhibit (see Tavernese 2008). At the panel discussion in Samsun, as well as in exit interviews with exhibit goers, many people expressed fear and dissatisfaction at the under-representation of the "real" Turks. Again, the guest book comments seemed to tell a different story:

"I was born Kurdish in Şanlıurfa in 1984. I grew up in Hatay as an Arab, and studied in Adiyaman as an Alevi. In 2005 I moved to Samsun and started becoming Laz... in 2006 I moved in with my Circassian girlfriend☺"—viewer from Samsun

In Istanbul, a male surgeon exhibit-goer in his 50s, took issue with the abundance of "non-Turks" in the collection. He was particularly angry about a display of diversity that, in his words, could not possibly be statistically representative of Turkey's population. He felt the exhibit was misleading. He challenged me to walk through the exhibit and point out 3 photographs of Sunni Turks. We walked through the exhibit, which in that particular venue contained 172 photographs. We were on our fourth Sunni Turk photograph when he realized that he had looked at the photographs without seeing them. To return to a quote from John Berger, "The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled" (1977:7).

The overwhelming response to the exhibit in İzmir, which had the smallest number of guest book comments and by all accounts the most contentious panel atmosphere, was that this was a crucial time to express unity, not diversity. İzmir's self-image is Kemalist and secular. There is less rural-urban migration to İzmir than there is to Istanbul or Ankara. One sees fewer headscarves on the streets of İzmir than in either of Turkey's larger cities. While the guest book comments were generally positive, people expressed their ambivalence about the subject

matter during the opening, at exit interviews during the exhibit, and at a very heated panel discussion. The panel discussion in Izmir lasted for three hours. It was the longest discussion of the entire tour. The audience was split between people who supported the message of the project, standing up and explaining their experiences growing up Kurdish, Greek, Roma, and other people who were suspicious of the projects intentions. The artist was accused of being a puppet of the West, of being a puppet of George Soros, and of trying to undermine the unity of the Turkish Republic by exhibiting Turkey's cultural diversity.

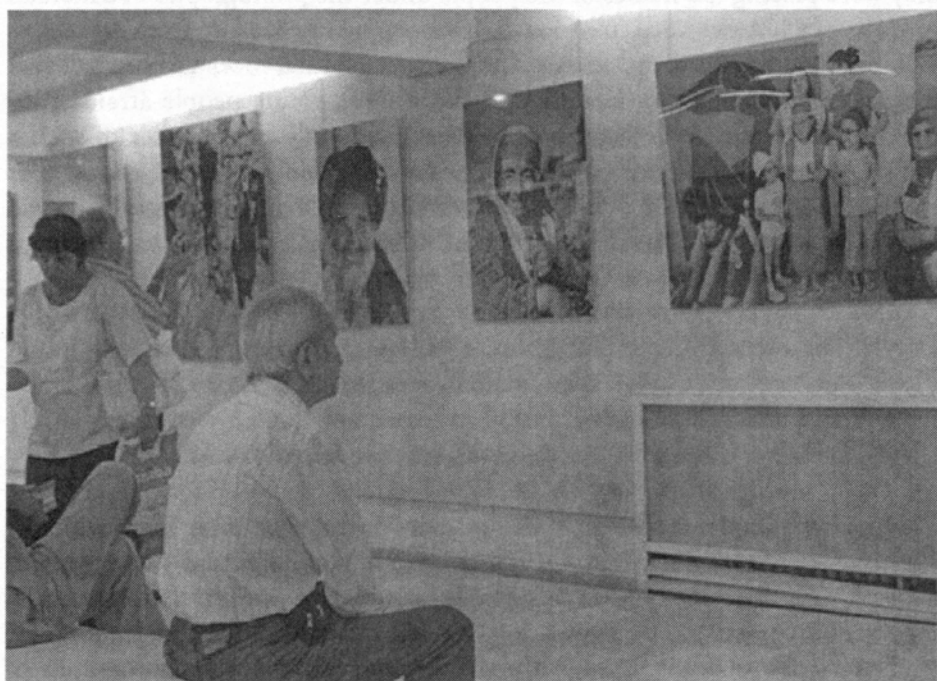


Figure 3. İzmir opening of Ebru, June 2008

During one exit interview, a high school art teacher in her 50's expressed her disappointment that there were not more images of "normal Turkish people" like her, doing modern work and dressed in modern clothing. An architect who came to the exhibit was convinced that the CIA was funding the artist's work, even though the artist may not be aware of it. He suspected that the US government was funding *my* research because of America's interest in seeing Turkey divided. Exhibit goer responses could be studied and analyzed to see how committed Turkish society is to the unity of their country, and then external powers could develop a plan of action for colonizing Turkey. During a different exit interview at the same venue, a retired civil servant who was

originally from Antakya, the region of Turkey that borders Syria, explained how he saw himself in every photograph. He felt that he would have fit equally well into any of the scenes portrayed, and that as a whole, the exhibit portrayed contemporary Turkey in a very accurate way.

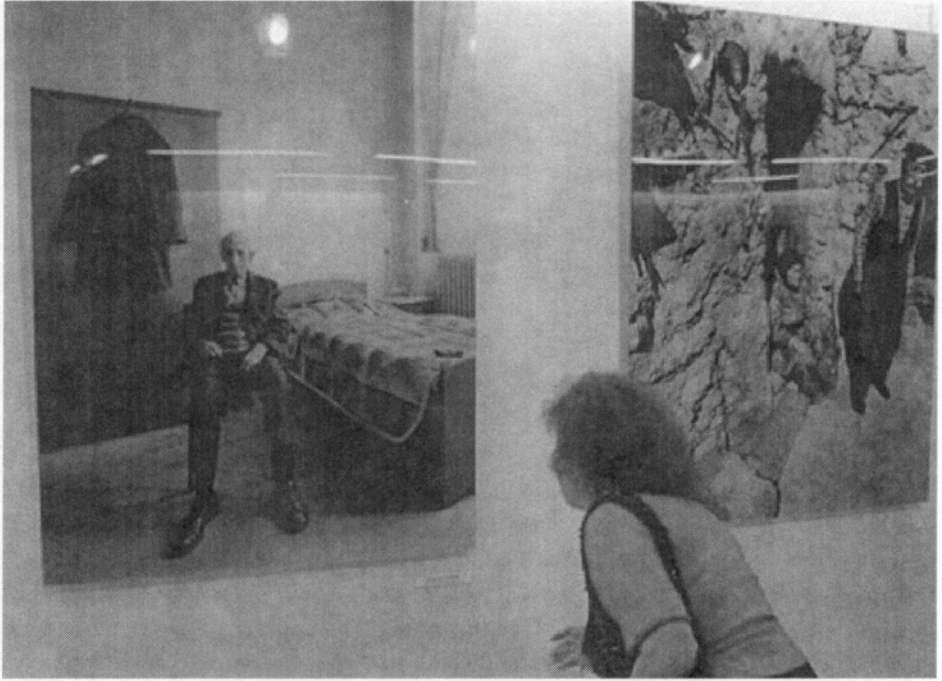


Figure 4. Woman reading label at İzmir exhibit, *"Jew, Istanbul"*, June 2008

Religious Turkey

Comments pertaining to images of religious practices also revealed diverse attitudes and came from many venues:

"While I was walking through the exhibit I was trying to hold back my tears. It was hard. What a big country we live in, and what a diverse country it is. It's not a mosaic. It is an EBRU. I would like to thank you for your project but I couldn't help but notice one thing that was missing: Is there evidence here of Turkey's main culture? How is possible to convey what that is without images of a mosque or the silhouette of a minaret? Isn't that the first thing we see when we go outside? Without those images, is

it possible to call this an accurate picture? Respectfully..." viewer from Istanbul

Commentary from one venue on this topic reveals the diverse array of opinions on the subject of religion:

"Where are your pictures of atheists and communists?"—viewer from Van

"You have worked hard to portray people from all of the different ethnicities and religion. Bravo. Thank you."—viewer from Van

"It is clear that you are spreading Christian propaganda. And your pictures don't reflect the real Turkey at all!"—viewer from Van

Although viewers from many venues commented on religious images, nowhere was this topic more contentious than in eastern Turkey. In the venues of towns and cities that had been home to sizeable Armenian populations that were massacred or deported during the early 1900's, such as Van and Kars, many people commented that the exhibit had too many photographs of Christians.¹⁰ In reality, only 10% of the photographs in both venues contained Christians or Christian imagery, and not all of them were Armenian Christians. This created some problems in Van in particular. The photographer chose an image of an Assyrian priest to be used on the invitation to the opening in Van. After the invitations were distributed, they were summarily collected, and the banners advertising the exhibit, which used the same image, were taken down and hidden. The artist and his team of installers were accused of being missionaries.

The panel discussion that took place in Van was poorly attended. There was a municipal ceremony that was taking place at the same time, preventing city government officials from attending. The audience included students, curious exhibit goers and a handful of academics from the local university and high schools. After a polite exchange of supportive and positive comments about the beautiful pictures in the exhibit hall, Durak asked audience members to explain the city government's reaction to the invitations. What ensued was a rather strained discussion of the community's sensitivity to the area's Christian past and ethnic diversity, tensions regarding the missionaries who are working in the Van area, and audience members debating the possibility of acknowledging ethnic diversity without threatening the unity of the country:



Figure 5. Photograph of Invitation to Van Exhibition with pullout image of priest, May 2008

- Audience member 1: We are very sensitive about issues of religion.
- Audience member 2: You are sensitive about Islam, but you are not sensitive to the religion of others.
- Audience member 1: You have to understand that Van is a town that has a large missionary presence, and it is problematic for us.
- Audience member 3: Who are you calling 'us'? Are we all Muslim?

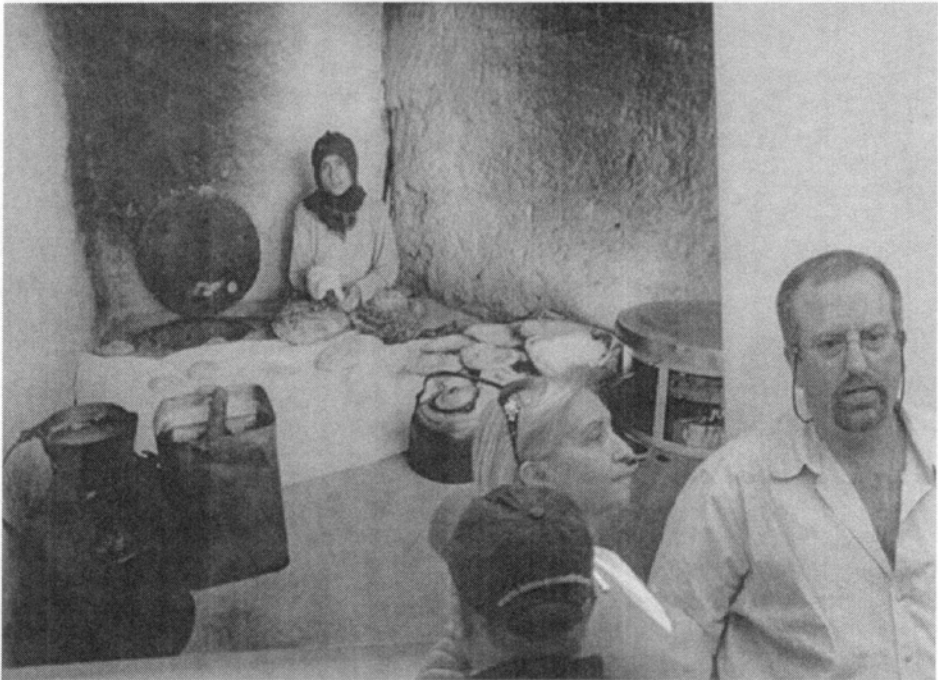


Figure 6. Exhibit goes discussing "Azeri, Van, 2002"

Underdeveloped Turkey

A percentage of viewers at all of the venues expressed shame, sadness, anger and embarrassment when viewing photographs of rural life. Some city dwellers said that the photographs did not accurately reflect life in Turkey. Some were sad to

say that they *did*. Some expressed embarrassment at the thought of the pictures of “those poor villagers” circulating around Europe and giving Europeans the false impression that Turkey is underdeveloped and full of minorities.

“Precisely the type of photos that will get us into the EU.”—viewer from Van.

“Thank you for showing us that the rural areas are still in need of so much. I hope you have a chance to open a different exhibit after the government and the people have dealt with these issues!”—viewer from Kars

“Why is it that foreign photographers and amateur photographers always feel drawn to the images of poor villagers? This isn’t art.”—viewer from Bursa

“Thank you for showing us the people who have been forgotten by society.”—7th grade viewer from Samsun

The young girl from Samsun who wrote the above comment in the guest book, when pressed to explain who the forgotten people are, categorized them as the poor, rural inhabitants of Turkey.

Other viewers could be seen throughout the tour standing in front of the photographs weeping. Although these people typically expressed gratitude for the exhibit and the ideas it supports, namely tolerance and expression of diversity, they had strong emotional reactions to photographs that reminded them about an ethnic past that was either covered up or simply not discussed (roughly 30% of the written comments expressed this sentiment). The images made them feel a tremendous sense of loss even as they felt validated by being reminded of who they were and represented in the collection. One elderly, tearful exhibit goer in Istanbul made the following comment:

Now that I see these photographs and the names of the different cultures, I want to find the group that my grandmother belongs to...but I can’t remember what she called it. No one has mentioned it since I was very young. I’m sure I will recognize the name when I see it. What a wonderful exhibit.

Exhibit goers who attended panel discussions often elaborated on their feelings of loss. At the panel in Kars, a small town in northeastern Turkey,

an elderly man stood up and expressed grief over the fact that his family was Molokan, and that they had never revealed their ethnic identity to anyone.¹¹ At a separate panel discussion in Bursa, a small town on the Sea of Marmara in western Turkey, a Kurdish man stood up and spoke on behalf of his brother, who was sitting beside him but was too choked up to speak. The man speaking expressed his gratitude for the long overdue and rare public discussion of ethnic diversity.¹² He did not explain the specific source of his brother's anguish.



Figure 7. Woman of Kirghiz ethnicity posing in front of "Kırgız, Ulupamir, 2002" in İzmir, June, 2008

Seeing the Self, Seeing the Other

The overwhelming majority of exhibit goers reported being able to identify with the images in the photographs. Some were happy about this, and others were not. Many of the photographs contain frontality (Tagg 1988:189), with the subject looking through the lens and into the eyes of the viewer. This effect of mutual viewing was comforting to some and disturbing to others. Semih Sokmen, an occasional panelist and the owner of Metis, *Ebru's* publishing house, most recently explained at the Ankara panel the spirit and message of the photographs as one of the factors that convinced him to publish the book. The photos capture diverse people with respect and in celebration, not in the

usual poses of sorrow and despair that captured the Turkish public's eye for so long.

The people who could not identify with the images and were not happy about it can be described as belonging to a cultural group that was not displayed at the exhibit or represented in the book, or the people who were of mixed heritage and felt that the categories and images, while clearly celebrating diversity, did not cover all possible variations of it. Returning to Worth (1981), who stated that pictures cannot express negative propositions, the negative proposition is implied in a collection of photographs put forward as a portrait of a nation's cultural diversity, whether it is the artist's intention or not.

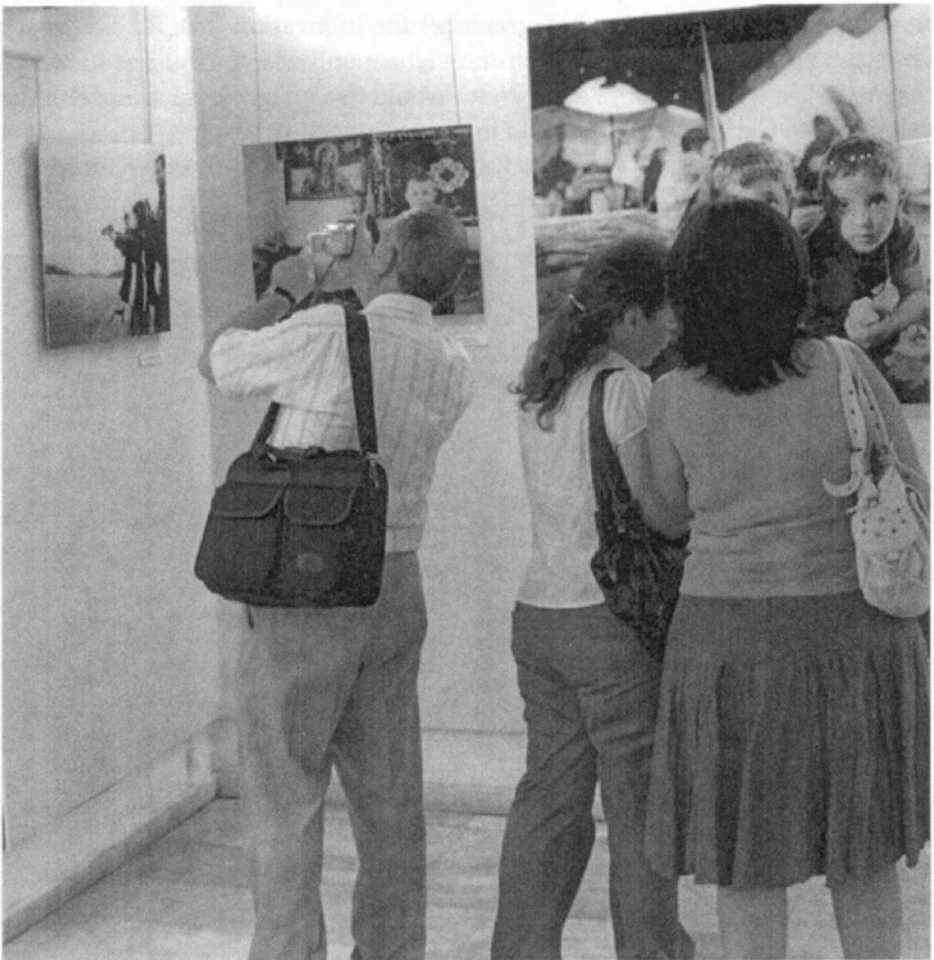


Figure 8. Man photographing "Sünni Türk, İstanbul, 2006", depicting a child firing a weapon.

Reactions to Specific Images

There were a few photographs that met with uniform resistance throughout the tour. Some can be categorized by type; for example, the images of men and boys with guns were disturbing to exhibit goers. They worried that unknowing people might stereotype 'all Kurds' as gun carriers, or 'all Black Sea children' as children who play with weapons:

Would these images be used to substantiate some claim that all Kurds are violent, that Black Sea culture is inherently violent, that Sunni Turks teach their children violence?

And what about the picture of Sunni Turkish hip hopsters in Istanbul? Would people viewing that photograph get the impression that Turkish youth were completely disconnected from the culture of Turkey? Would it look like they were just trying to imitate the West? Would this image be traveling with the exhibition to Germany? What would the Europeans think?!

Another photograph that elicited strong reactions was the metro photograph below (Figure 9):



Figure 9. "Sünni Türk, İstanbul, 2006"

The label was interpreted as ambiguous. People stood in front of the photo and argued about the subject: was it the woman on the right, or the one on the left? They argued about the gaze: isn't it typical that the secular woman would be looking directly into the camera, while the covered woman would be looking away? They argued about the spontaneity of the image: did the photographer pose the women, or did the photograph just come out that way?¹³

Exhibit goers all over Turkey read this image as indicative of the state of affairs in Turkey—secular against religious, educated west-leaning urbanites against neoconservative political Islamists. Some argued that the photograph confirmed the divide that exists, and others wished out loud that both women could have been looking straight into the lens. It would have, they suggested, portrayed a stronger sense of the mutual dislike, intolerance and defiance felt and expressed by inhabitants of these separate-yet-abutting segments of Turkish society.

Fragments of Truth

Exhibit goers' responses and reactions to *Ebru* reveal the extent to which modernizing, secularizing, homogenizing republican ideals have been internalized by Turkish society. People who did not have negative reactions to the display of religious practices of Muslims might have felt threatened by the images of Christian rituals, thereby expressing a level of discomfort with ethnic diversity. Others who did not mind seeing the rich display of cultural diversity in the form of food, interior decoration and facial features might have taken issue with the images of religious practices, thereby expressing a preference for images that support a secular ideal. Still others were bothered little by ethnic and religious variety, but focused instead on a disappointing display of poverty and underdevelopment, which would suggest that the national drive for modernization had stopped short of its goal.

Overall, even when the exhibition stirred up feelings of loss, hopelessness and regret in exhibit goers, they tended to describe it as a worthwhile experience for them and other members of society. In other words, the national discussion of how to deal with the diversity that exists in Turkey may not be an easy one, but it is a necessary one. For every person who felt that the exhibit was a waste of time, too provocative, or just plain bad art, there were many more who appreciated *Ebru's* message. As one young viewer from Antakya pointed out, "As it turns out, there was nothing to be afraid of."

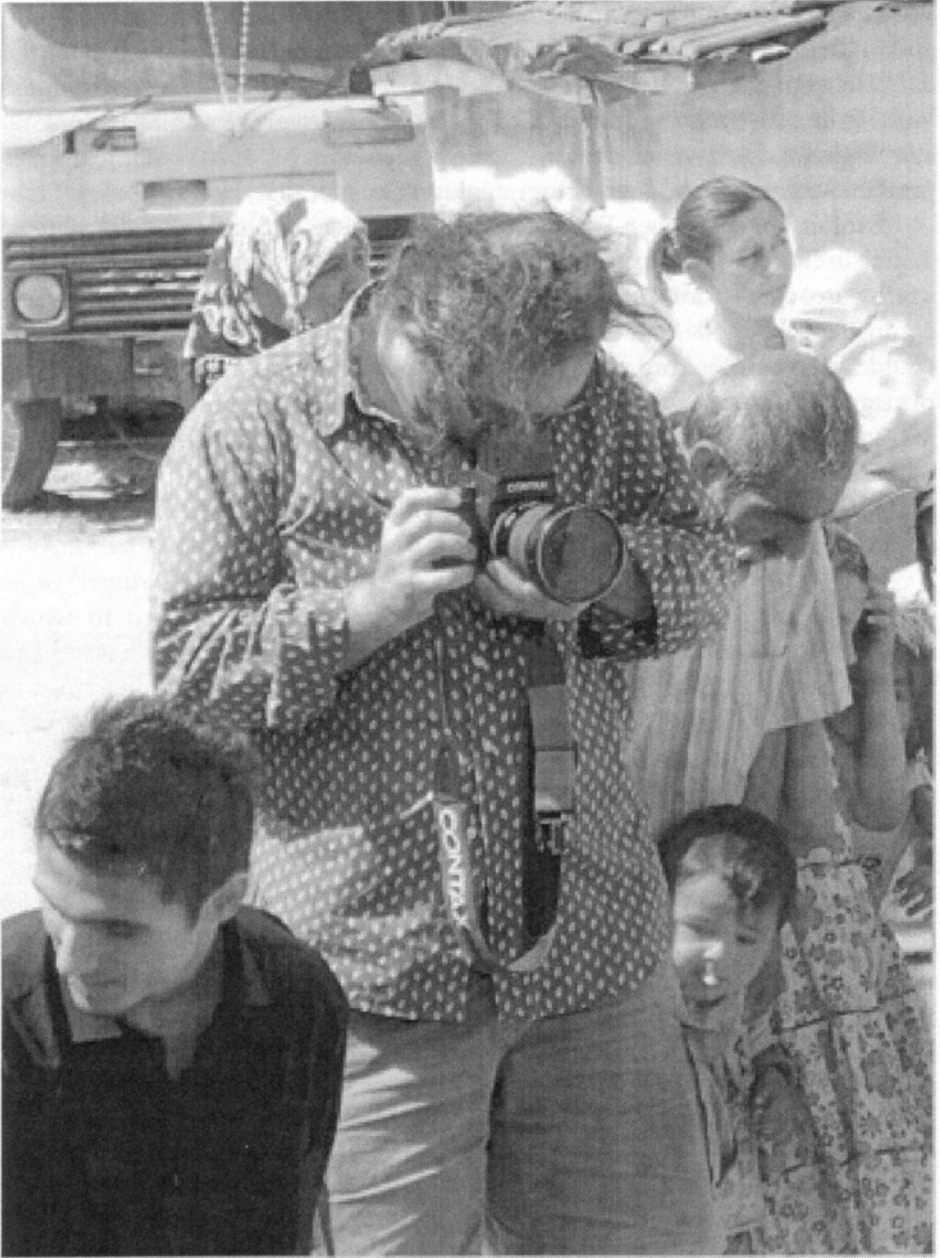


Figure 10. Attila Durak, Roma village in Trakya, 2007

As *Ebru* ends its tour of Turkey and leaves this month for Germany and France, the lenses of 'self' and 'other' will change significantly. Europeans will

be viewing an exhibit of their largest immigrant minority as they exist in their ancestral land. The differences between rural and urban, religious and secular, Armenian and Greek, Turk and Kurd, will be re-presented and re-read in the too familiar frames of East and West, with the indigenous artist presenting 'his people' to another society.¹⁴ These are the images of people who live beyond the gaze of European tourists on Turkish beaches and in the spice bazaar. *Ebru* will face different challenges, encounter different questions, and with any luck, the challenge of a whole different set of assumptions about Turkishness. As Silva states (2004), may the "native pen-wielding" of *Ebru*'s creators continue to make provocative contributions to the discourse(s) of difference and belonging.

Endnotes

1 I conducted exit interviews at venues in Istanbul, Diyarbakir, Van, Izmir, between June 2007 and March 2009, attended the accompanying discussion panels in Istanbul, Diyarbakir, Van, Izmir and Ankara and reviewed guest book comments for all of the venues—more than 2,000 pages of comments. In addition, I have interviewed the artist, panelists who participated in a majority of the panels, and exhibit volunteers in Istanbul, Izmir, Diyarbakir, Van and Ankara. I reviewed videotapes of the discussion panels that I could not attend, as well as national and local media coverage of the exhibit. Research in 2007 coincided with Fulbright-funded research on a separate project. Research conducted during the summer of 2008 was made possible with the support of the Babson Faculty Research Fund at Babson College.

2 The artist decided to organize the photographs differently for the Ankara exhibit. Instead of having sections of the exhibit devoted to particular activities, he dedicated specific walls to a particular aspect of daily life across cultures: there was a food wall, a music wall, a wall with people grieving, one with children playing, etc. He later commented that he thought the message of the exhibit was clearer to people who saw the images organized in this manner.

3 Two venues in particular were challenging in this regard. The staff at the Kültür Merkezi in İzmir frequently 'forgot' to play the CD, most probably due to a commonly expressed local attitude that the articulation of diversity is unpatriotic. The manager of the venue in Mersin, a large shopping mall, explained that playing folk music in a modern shopping mall would create the wrong (rural) atmosphere for its sophisticated clientele.

4 Keyder 1997:45.

5 For a detailed account of Atatürk's reforms, see Zurcher (2004).

6 When considering the crucial role that language plays in the forging of a national identity, it is easy to understand why the ruling elites would engineer a move away from indigenous Anatolian languages and promote the study of European languages (1983). It was consistent not only with the desire to cleanse modern Turkey's linguistic palette, but also to add tints of Europeanness in the form of foreign language education.

7 The events described in this section occurred while the author was in Turkey.

8 The information in this section comes from my analysis of guest book comments, exit interviews, and conversations with exhibit goers in the exhibit halls. I began this research at the opening in June 2007 and concluded when the Ankara exhibit ended in March of 2009.

9 Gür (2007), Candan (2007) and Özyürek (2006) also explore Turkish audience reception to exhibits and national heritage sites as a way of analyzing assumptions about Turkish identity.

10 Since the people of Anatolia tend to think in terms of ethno-religious identity as opposed

to separate ethnic and religious identities, their mention of Christians can most definitely be read in this context as 'Armenian' since their area was home to a large Armenian population. A reference to Christians on the Black Sea might refer to Pontic Greeks, but the ethnic aspect of ethno-religious identity was not as important here as the religious aspect.

11 Seen while reviewing DVD of Kars panel.

12 Seen in review of DVD of Bursa panel.

13 According to the photographer, the woman on the left turned her head just as he was taking the picture. At that moment, he thought the photograph would be one he would not want to use. Upon viewing it afterwards, he decided otherwise.

14 See Howard (2006) and Ruby (1991) for discussions of indigenous artists and issues of representation.

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